

Chapter 6

Brick Lane

Director:	Sarah Gavron
Actors:	Tannishtha Chatterjee, Satish Kaushik, Christopher Simpson
Country:	United Kingdom
Year:	2007
Length	102 minutes

Nazneen, after her mother commits suicide, has to move from Bangladesh to London, where she marries Chanu, an elderly man without a permanent job. The film—based on Monica Ali’s book—explores Nazneen’s life in the Western city and her personal growth, from the earlier years, when she misses her native land, to the maturation of her love towards her husband and daughters, Bibi and Shahana. The letters that Nazneen receives from her sister Hasina represent the only link to Bangladesh, and in the course of the movie the female protagonist also falls in love with Karim, who helps her when she decides to work from home. Yet, after the terrorists attack the Twin Towers, on September 11, 2001, the main characters’ lives change, and religious and cultural separations emerge.

One of the central topics in *Brick Lane* is represented by the “home”, which is indeed a constant word in many dialogues, such as the ones between Nazneen and her husband, or between Nazneen and Karim, as well as in the female protagonist’s inner thoughts (00:05:30):

(22) NAZNEEN: “I think of my sister, think of home.”

The mental notion of “home” is generally connected to the places where the characters want to live, where they feel as part of the socio-cultural context, which does not always coincide with London. In this sense, one of the final dialogues is crucial in order to acknowledge Nazneen’s maturation: she accepts her role of leader of her family and eventually decides to stay in Britain; her husband, instead, decides to leave (01:27:32 – 01:27:55):

(23) NAZNEEN: “This is my home. I cannot leave.”
CHANU: “I cannot stay. I cannot stay.”

6.1 Linguistic Dimensions of the Movie

The interactions are characterised by two main linguistic variations, represented by Bengali and the adoption of a scripted ELF variation,

particularly on the part of Chanu. His use of the scripted variation has socio-cultural and functional consequences, since he is actually opposed to the other English people and even to his daughter. In fact, Nazneen's family also embodies generational and cultural clashes, since Chanu constantly aims at becoming integrated in the London society, but he gets more and more frustrated because he constantly loses his jobs. As a result, he usually blames his English co-workers, who are defined by him as "ignorant types" or "uneducated".

Bengali identifies the scenes set in the past, when Nazneen still lived in Bangladesh, and the audiovisual construction conveys a dreamlike shade to such scenes, which result brighter if compared to the ones set in London, due to their music and photography. Furthermore, the parts in Bengali—which are subtitled in English—are generally connected to the notions of "home" and "native land", as confirmed by the fact that such linguistic dimension introduces Hasina's letters, which Nazneen reads for the viewers. In this sense, the latter can be considered as an "artistic" solution, since apart from the first lines, the letters are then continued in English, to preserve the level of accessibility of the film.

Besides the above scenes, and according to a strategy that was already identified in the construction of *Bend It like Beckham* (Chapter 4 above), also the dialogues between parents and children are sometimes opened and closed in Bengali or by using typical expressions such as "*Abba*" and "*Amma*". If, on the one hand, this choice contributes to preserve the accessibility of the film to the English audience, on the other hand this also entails that the characters still perceive their native land as part of their experience, of their inner thoughts, as a presence that parents aim at keeping alive, especially in younger generations.

As for English, whereas the language spoken by Bibi and Shahana is closer to the Standard variety, Chanu's English could be labelled as a scripted ELF variation, characterised by specific syntactic deviations. One of such deviations is exploited in the quarrel between Shahana and her father that takes place in (24) below, when the girl says that she does not want to go back to Bangladesh (00:24:30 – 00:24:34):

- (24) CHANU: "What is the wrong with you?"
SHAHANA: "You mean, 'what is wrong with you?'."

Once Shahana reproaches and corrects her father, the latter decides to pour all his frustration on English itself, as exemplified by (25) below (00:24:41 – 00:24:57):

- (25) CHANU: "From now on, no one speaks English."
SHAHANA: "You said that last time."

- CHANU: “Your behaviour is getting bad to worse!”
 NAZNEEN: “[in Bengali] Leave her!”
 CHANU: “This is what they teach you at the school?
 This is what they teach you? I will not allow
 this to happen! To learn manners and to respect
 her father!”

As in (24), also (25) contains some deviations from standard rules that mark the man’s variation as a scripted type of lingua franca, such as the addition of the article “the” in “the wrong”, from extract (24) and the inclusion of the same article in “at the school”, from (25). It can be surmised that those strategies have the functional dimension of characterising the man as a non-native speaker, and in particular of actualising the difficulties that he faces when using English. Once the mistakes are notified, in fact, he wants everyone to speak Bengali, his L1, which is therefore reminiscent of the experiential dimensions of safety and home. Finally, also consider the transfer of some cultural notions from Chanu’s native context, when he lists the qualities that his daughter should possess. “To learn manners and to respect her father” are two of the achievements that Shahana should pursue, but Chanu’s turn is again marked by a fragmented syntactic structure that is connected to the scripted ELF variation. Because of such deviations, though, it is not possible to infer the appropriate semantic and communicative dimensions only by focusing on the verbal elements. The man only says “To learn manners and to respect her father”, with a possible source of ambiguity in understanding whether he is describing what should be taught at school, what she should learn at home, what he aims to attain by means of his punishment. In fact, the real intentionality can be acknowledged from a multimodal perspective, since the man’s voice and the development of the scene (which follows the dialogue under analysis) help to infer the appropriate illocutionary force.

6.2 Conversation Analysis

The structure of the interactions may vary according to specific factors mainly connected to the speakers’ social roles, as already illustrated by the above dialogue between Shahana and Chanu. Although the man is supposed to play high status, his lines entail that he has indeed a different role in relation to English speakers and his daughters as well, who has a “Westernised” behaviour, by opposing her father.

In fact, in considering exchange (25) again, it is possible to identify a typical structure where two speakers are confronting, both of them challenging the interlocutor’s statements. What is more, eventually Nazneen takes the floor to support her daughter, and this undermines Chanu’s social

role. When Chanu reacts, he tries to mention the appropriate behaviour by resorting to two fake eliciting moves, which only serve to introduce the explanation of what he thinks education should be like.

Finally, the different structure of the dialogues whose participants are on the same level are taken into account, such as the following one between Nazneen and Karim, which takes place when they have an affair (extract from 00:52:12 – 00:52:49):

- (26) KARIM: “[...] Your Westernised girl, into going out, having a laugh, short skirts as soon as she’s out of her father’s sight. Then you have your religious girl. You think they’d be good wife material but they ain’t, ’cos all they wanna do is argue.”
- NAZNEEN: “So, what about me?”
- KARIM: “You... you’re the real thing. A girl from the village.”

From Karim’s lines it is possible to infer what he thinks about the condition of women and in particular about the “Westernised” girls, who are different from Nazneen, a girl from the village. It is also important to say that the dialogue takes place before the attack to the Twin Towers. That historical event marks the beginning of Karim’s extremism, and leads Nazneen to put an end to their romantic liaison. Yet, since in (26) the two participants are still on the same level, the structure does not display challenging or cross-cultural challenging moves, like in *Blood Diamond*. Karim instead is actually replying to the woman’s questions, justifying and explaining his ideas, by means of supporting moves. Indeed, it is not by chance if this is one of the dialogues that are composed by questions directly followed by actual answers, to mark the different type of interpersonal relationship.

An analysis of the Italian version is not provided because the movie has not an Italian distribution: it was only presented during the XXVII Turin Film Festival, with subtitles.